

The Divinity of Ed Breslin's Memoir of Ivy League Basketball



Prologue

Ask Ed Breslin his philosophy on basketball and he'll offer you a mirror.

You'll probably be puzzled, but don't worry – Breslin is the jolly and kindhearted spirit we are often told of but rarely see.

With more than two decades of editing and publishing experience, Breslin isn't a literary novice by any stretch. Where other experiential sporting narratives prove vapid, *The Divine Nature of Basketball* glistens with humility and candor. This installment—his first assessing sport—became an attempt to recalibrate his love for an activity that piloted much of his childhood.

“To me, basketball was the antidote to seasonal depression,” he says. “This game was designed to alleviate winter depression, to chase the winter blues.”

The Divine Nature of Basketball is a memoir, an amalgamation of retrospection and the inherent heartache provided by sport. But more importantly, it's an autobiographical narrative whose footing is shared by many, a portrait of an unremitting love for basketball and the life lessons the game instills. Long after he left the court, Breslin's internal chemistry continues to palpitate to the metronome provided by the ball and hardwood.

Part 1

For a single season, Ed Breslin set out to follow a college basketball team.

He'd always been enthralled by the Palestra, "The Cathedral of College Basketball," that the University of Pennsylvania Quakers have called home since 1927. A court Kobe Bryant and Wilt Chamberlain won state championships in.

Yet even the oldest collegiate basketball court in North America paled in comparison to the John J. Lee Amphitheater. Housed in Payne Whitney Gymnasium—the second-largest gym in the world by cubic feet—the Yale University Bulldogs have been stationed at the JLA since Herbert Hoover was President.

Erected in the Jigsaw Gothic architecture that blankets most of the campus, the JLA's tongue and groove maple on wooden sleepers transfixed Breslin the moment he entered the door. By his account, he fell in love with college basketball in the 1960s.

"When I entered the gym, it felt like what a religious vision was to early church mystics," he says. "It's breathtakingly beautiful, just the right size, just the right texture."

Before the 2011 season, Breslin petitioned head coach James Jones to be a *faux*-assistant coach, an observing shadow. Jones—who still coaches the Bulldogs today—obliged, and the memoir began to write itself.

Part 2

What followed was one of the most entertaining and ethos-driven seasons in Yale basketball's acclaimed history. Breslin dices and dissects, reforms and melds the nature of the game with his writing.

It's unmistakable early on that Breslin is an unrelenting student of the game, enthralled by the geometry of the game—how each line, point and plane create an avenue of opportunity. "You should strive for the seeing-eye dog synchronicity of acting as five independent fingers on the same palm in the same hand," he says. If fluidity were a metric, Breslin would be the first attempting to capture it and explain his findings to the masses.

Linked within the progression of the season is a deeper and more uplifting story of a man whose physical abilities kept him in the stands rather than atop the wood. Coupled with Breslin's touchstone memories, this relatable subplot is candid and human. Anyone that has ever felt the rush of dribbling a ball until they lost sight of their hands in the dark of dusk can relate to Breslin's syntax. It's embedded in each page. His story is their story.

From the first practice of the season to their final game against Fairfield at the CollegeInsider.com Tournament, Breslin followed his team. In time, he became a

member of their family. What once were players and coaches became friends and support systems. “I thought they were my kids,” he says. “It becomes almost parietal.”

Trekking hours by train to New Haven for each practice, Breslin’s commitment to the program was unwavering. When they traveled to North Carolina to face Wake Forest in December, he went. Two days later when Yale faced Billy Donovan’s squad in Gainesville, he cheered the loudest.

Among the many components of the game that Breslin calls attention to, the commitment to academia and tradition that is embodied by the Ivy League is given ample clarification. “It represents throwback basketball, to me,” he says. “There are only eight teams in the conference, academics takes precedence over athletics, and there aren’t many one-and-done players here.”

Breslin isn’t so much a fundamentalist as he is a proponent of experience before exploitation. The memoir considers the relevant bombardment of headlines, 24-hour sporting analysis, and contract renegotiations that dilute the messages sport provides. “When the head coach at Alabama is making \$5 million, something is wrong with the value state,” he says. “It’s a problem when basketball coaches are making \$5 million, too.”

The memoir recounts players furiously attempting to complete homework assignments and studying on returning bus rides beneath opaque lighting, and the clenched-fist emotions subsequent last-second losses. It’s much more than a game, Breslin will tell you. Basketball is a cerebral and somatic unending venture, an alternative moral compass afforded outside the confines of religion.

The Yale Bulldogs went 19-10 in 2011-12. It was just the eighth time in school history that Yale had accrued that many wins. Ed Breslin was there for all of them. In the end, it didn’t matter that Yale had missed the NCAA Tournament again, continuing a drought spanning longer than six decades. It didn’t matter that they lost their last two to rivals Harvard and Dartmouth. This season, like every season, is much more than just a sum of integers.

Epilogue

When I ask Breslin how many games he’s attended this season at the JLA, he apologizes profusely, telling me that he’s missed a single game. “My wife, she’s a teacher, her class got moved and...I couldn’t figure out how to get the dog, the cat, and my wife to the country house and get myself over to New Hampshire, which is a pretty long ride from New York City, it’s about six hours,” he says. “I feel emotionally attached to the kids.”

One of the first things Breslin tells me in the interview is, “I used to think I should’ve tried to be a sportswriter.” Consider his first installment, *The Divine Nature of Basketball*, a slam dunk.

--

Available for purchase on Amazon.com, BarnesAndNoble.com, and Indiebound.org.

Original article can be found at: <http://fansided.com/2014/03/28/divinity-ed-breslins-memoir-ivy-league-basketball/>